

CHAPTER ONE

Fynhallow, Isle of Gunn, Orkney
May 2024

It's almost sunrise.

A magenta streak across the horizon, a smooth, glittering sea.

The ranger's dog is barking, a wild, staccato squeal that splits the calm.

She shouts at him now to be quiet, her voice growing louder, her pace quickening as she moves towards him. He's a springer spaniel, two years old, easily roused. But he's never barked like this before. As though he's afraid.

Fynhallow's sand is soft, silken white, a seam that joins the isle of Gunn to the North Sea.

The silhouette of the dog noses and whines at a dark shape by the caves that run along the outcrop. It must be a dolphin, she thinks, perhaps a pilot whale. Except there's no fin, no shape of a tail.

She sees the shape of two legs, and gasps.

The curious odour that she caught earlier registers: something has been burning. The wind was in the wrong direction before, but now she catches notes of flame and meat. The dog paws the ground near the body; she sees the hands are bound together at the end of bent, blackened arms.

Her pulse racing, the ranger reaches for her phone and flicks on the torch, and when the harsh white light falls on a charred grimace she drops the phone to the ground with a shout.

It lands upward, the white glare of the torch falling on the body. It is clear that the person is dead.

And her torchlight picks out another shape further along the bay. She breaks into a sprint, talking to the dog as he follows her, soothing him.

Somewhere, embers glisten in a nest of twigs like rubies.

She lurches to a stop, just where the tide meets the sand. At her feet is the body of a teenage girl, a *Nirvana* print visible on her sooty T-shirt, tattoos of mermaids and beer cans on her forearms. Her face is encrusted with blood. The ranger crouches, noticing the dog is licking the girl's foot and whining.

Oh God, she thinks, fear thumping in her throat. Was this an accident, or murder?

She moves her fingers to the girl's neck, gasping with relief when she finds a faint pulse.

The girl is still alive.

Quickly the ranger snatches up her phone and begins to dial.